

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, October 31, 1896, with transcript

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL TO MABEL (Hubbard) BELL Beinn Bhreagh, C. B.

Saturday, October 31, 1896. My dear little wife:

Just received my first letter from you since leaving Washington, dated October 27th. It is worth while going away in order to hear from you — at least when your letters are like that just received. I have been almost afraid of your handwriting — for fear of a slap! — in black and white. It feels very lonely here without you all — and a word or two from you cheers me up. Thanks.

You say Elsie is devoting an hour a day to Physics. What book is she using? Ordinary text-books are dry and uninteresting. They seem to be arranged with the special object of disgusting the immature mind with the subject. Why would it not be a good plan for her — when she has finished her studies for the day — to shut her book and write down in her own words what she has learned. If she sent me her notes I could follow her progress and help her. There is nothing I would enjoy more than helping her in this way.

Hope you won't take Freeman as a model if he uses 605 words in one sentence!

Have read with much interest General Porter's article "Campaigning with Grant" in the November Century. It seems to be well written and I will look out for the continuation. Only hope that Grant will not last as long as Napoleon — in the Century!

A good reply that of the French Marshall who had 2 risen from the ranks — to the hereditary nobles who tried to snub him in Vienna:—

"I am an ancestor; you are only descendants."

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Have you read of the discovery in Mexico, of a prehistoric city larger than New York — larger even than greater New York? The ruins are said to cover one thousand square miles of territory! — now overgrown with a tropical forest. A most important discovery — if true. An American — a Mr. Niven — is credited with the find.

Read Mr. Stead's article in the Review of Reviews upon "The Eastern Ogre or St. George to the Rescue." A severe arraignment of the British position in regard to Turkey.

Prof. Ramsay has succeeded by a process of diffusion — in separating Helium — into two parts having very different specific gravities and yet, apparently identical properties. The suggestion has been hazarded that the so-called "Atoms" of a chemical substance — are not all of the same weight — the "atomic weight" being an average only. An important thought.

Review of Reviews takes note of an article by Miss Helen Zimmern upon "Our Perishing Books." This reminds me of the opinion expressed by Mr. George Kennan some months ago — that our books and periodicals will not last for more than about fifty years on account of the poor material of the paper.

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Miss Zimmern takes the same view. The subject is certainly a most important one — and should be looked into. I like Mr. Kennan's suggestions that Congress should take action — and make it obligatory upon publishers — to supply the Congressional and other libraries with copies of their publications printed on good durable paper. Newspapers could easily print off a few copies on good paper for preservation. If something is not done to aid preservation — the future historian will look in vain — for the materials of today. No newspapers files will be in existence — or — if in existence they will be unreadable — in the next century.

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Bryan's speeches will be no great loss — but surely — good books deserve good paper. Wood pulp will not last — and linen is now little used. Miss Zimmern suggests paper containing fibres of raw silk as the most durable.

The Dunlaps intend to put up some new buildings in Baddeck — and wanted to know whether they could make arrangements with us to advance the money required. They have paid back a large portion of the former loan — and propose to extinguish the old mortgage and give a new one for the increased amount. Mr. McCurdy has told them that we do not care to do this — but if they can find some one else to advance the money — we shall be glad to have the present mortgage extinguished so that they may be able to give a first mortgage upon the property as security.

As old Mrs. Dunlap — annually paid back a portion of the Principal — the security has been continuously improving — 4 and as only a comparatively small amount remains to be paid — it would be well for them to borrow enough to pay off our claim — as well as build the proposed extension — and give a first-mortgage as security. I have no doubt it will prove a safe investment — but I am sure that you will agree with me — that we don't want to go into it.

We advanced the money before — not as an investment — but out of kindly feeling to the Dunlaps. Mr. McCurdy thinks that the Dunlaps have found some one willing to advance the money required — and it is probable that our mortgage will be paid off soon.

If so would you be willing to use the money in building a good substantial wharf here at the Point — to replace the one washed away by the storm?

Event. Plum pie at dinner today — made from our own plums!

Mr. McCurdy is still employed in the old occupation of opening and shutting gates. He may go on for ever finding new methods of accomplishing this result — but I don't see why that should prevent him from securing the simple form of apparatus already devised. All his so

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called “improvements” — however ingenious — or meritorious — are more complicated — and will cost more to make. If they should prove to be really of value — they could be made the subjects of separate applications for Latters Patent. In the meantime time is slipping away — and if he does not look out, his original invention will have been 5 in public use for more than two years and be therefore unpatentable. I am not sure however whether the experimental use of the contrivance by himself and others can be called “public” use — although exposed to public gate — and used too *by the public* who come upon our place or upon his.

His latest notion is to blow the gate open — or shut — by air compressed by the wheel of the passing vehicle. Negative progress in the laboratory today.

Wing like that shown above gave poor results. Lift only 47 grammes. This shows the fatality of attempting to theorize with insufficient data. Absence from Beinn Bhreagh compelled me to speculate — but experiments do not sustain my results — at least in the above case.

Theory and experiment must go hand in hand — the one checking and verifying the other.

Tried experiments today with motors so arranged as to rotate in the opposite direction to that formerly employed — and with reversed propellers. Lifts very poor — not comparable to the others. Sorry for this — because the arrangement very advantageous in other respects. I am bothered by the presence of the motor in the very place where a wing should be. The motor is in the way — and prevents exploration of the in-draught field near the propeller. The arrangement tried today places 6 the motor on the other side of the propeller — and gives me a clear space to explore — but unfortunately the motor (being now in the out-draught) interferes with motion of the propeller.

Former arrangement.

Arrangement today.

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Am exploring the part A of the field of the propeller.

Your loving husband, Alec. P. S. I don't give today's results because the lifts were so slight as to be unreliable. AGB.